

# WHERE ARE THE CHILDREN?

Evangelism beyond Sunday morning



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# INTRODUCTION

*Where are the Children?* is designed to help you and your fellow Christians to explore ways of enabling children to hear the good news of God in Christ. During the last 20 years, most churches have focused their ministry with children on providing nurture during the Sunday morning service. Worshipping as the Lord's family on the Lord's Day is vital but, with a rapidly changing and mobile society, it is essential to reach out to children in other ways and within the local community. It is equally important to recognize and celebrate the worship that is going on at other times and in other places, in Church schools, at parent and toddler groups, in holiday clubs and some uniformed organizations. The list is endless but these other ways of being Church often remain unnoticed and unreported.

In 1991, the Church of England published a report, *All God's Children?* with the stark sub-title, 'Children's Evangelism in Crisis'.<sup>1</sup> It stated that only 15 per cent of children aged less than 13 years were involved in church-related activities. It questioned whether Sunday was the best day on which to reach unchurched children. It explored the relationship between a church and its local schools and the value of uniformed organizations. Since then, the child's world has changed radically, but the issues remain.

Since that report was published, thousands of youngsters have attended church-led holiday clubs, pre-schools and toddler groups. Children are more involved in Sunday worship, including the Eucharist. Some schools have started to form links with local churches as part of their RE curriculum and for acts of worship. In spite of this excellent work, however, the vast majority of our churches only offer their children's ministry on Sunday and the numbers of children attending Sunday services has continued to decline. It has been suggested that nearly half of Anglican churches claim they have no children at all.

The immediate reaction to a statement like that must be to ask whether it is strictly true. It is true that the youngsters who come to church on Sundays are almost entirely the children of the adult congregation. It is true that numbers are often small. If we look beyond Sunday morning, however, we see a more optimistic picture.

There are the children who are worshipping regularly at family services, parent and toddler clubs, midweek activities, and in our Church schools. There are the children who come to Parade services, Mothering Sunday, Harvest Thanksgiving or Christingles. Then there are those who come to school carol services, or as guests at baptisms or weddings and occasionally at funerals.

Then there are the hidden children who use the church hall for sports or drama, who belong to uniformed organizations or visit a church as part of an RE lesson and so on.

Once we go into the community and look at the opportunities, instead of counting the few that come through the church doors every Sunday, our whole perspective changes.

That is what this book is about. It will explore some of the issues concerning today's children and ways in which we, the Church, will have to change our way of thinking and operating if we are to reach them.

## USING THIS BOOK

This book can be used in several ways:

- As information and training for clergy or lay people who want to explore the whole subject of evangelism among children.
- To help children's leaders to develop the children's work in their local church.
- Some churches or districts are employing a paid children's worker. Part of his or her brief will include work with non-church children and their families. The material in this book could form part of the basic training.

- Evangelists could use the material to focus on a ministry among children.
- Separate sections can be used as a study guide to developing a particular project, or addressing an issue concerning evangelism among children.

The material is organized in four sections:

- Part One: Children everywhere
- Part Two: Practicalities of evangelism
- Centre point
- Part Three: Opportunities and activities

**Part One** is designed as a short training course or discussion programme. It could be used by any group of children's workers or church leaders that wants to get to grips with the scenario of today's children and the opportunities and challenges of engaging with them in the community.

It deals with the culture of children and the church's ministry among them at the beginning of the 21st century. It reviews the ways that we can engage with young people but also the obstacles that we unwittingly put in the way of their hearing the Christian story. This provides vital information before exploring any way of engaging with children whether inside or outside the Church family.

Each chapter has a biblical link and, to aid your study, a case study with pointers for discussion or reflection.

**Part Two** attempts to tell you all the things that you need to know about strategic planning and ways of managing the changes that will happen when you focus on reaching out to children. It includes information on training and ways of getting financial help as well as outlining the legal requirements and support that is available. Many churches do not realize that help is at hand or think that it only applies to large projects, so just reading this may save you money for a start! All the information is earthed in a Bible link and points for reflection and action.

**Centre Point**, the chapter on worship, could be read in conjunction with any part of this book or on its own. It explores the rationale for our ministry among children—the child’s relationship with God. This may involve introducing worship to children who have little or no experience of it. It includes ways of providing a sacred space for God within a busy activity and within the child him/herself. It also provides information on ways of praying that relate to the culture of today’s children and imaginative use of music and visual aids.

**Part Three** begins by reviewing three areas of potential growth—small groups of children, toddlers, and work with local schools. Then it provides advice on running specific clubs or activities. As many of the principles of running one kind of activity are common to all, each chapter should be read in conjunction with Part Two and the Centre Point in order to avoid repeating almost identical material in each chapter.

As with the other two parts, each chapter has a Bible link and pointers for reflection.

The **Postscript** looks forward to your next steps in evangelism among children, the disappointments and the hopes.

## READING THIS BOOK

You may be reading this book because you have a particular project in mind or because your church council has asked you to research it. Keep written notes so that when you need to put your plans in action or report to your church leaders or fellow workers you are well prepared.

If you are working in a group, you may find it contains people who have different experiences and perceptions from your own. Concentrate on listening and then contributing to what they have said. We can always learn from each other’s experience.

The term ‘evangelism’ can produce strong feelings and negative views. This is usually from people who have a stereotyped view of it.

A few methods are insensitive and inappropriate, but every situation is different and there are numerous ways of approaching this subject. Do not be afraid to contribute your own experience and thoughts. There is a section about this in Chapter 2, 'Back to where we started'.

Many Christians look at their ministry as operating only from the Church context. You will gain a fuller picture and a lot of first-hand experience if you discuss your ideas with a teacher, club leader or someone with experience of working among children in the community, as well as with people at your church.

However you are exploring this subject, allow God to become part of the thinking and discussion. He longs for children to hear and recognize his voice, so he is the most important companion as you seek to make him known to his children.

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**NOTE**

1. *All God's Children?* GS988 (1991)

## BEING A CHILD TODAY

The last 20 years have seen more changes in a child's life than at any other time in history. The world has been through the fastest technical revolution in the life of this planet, with accompanying changes in lifestyle and economics. This has had a major effect on every single person, but children have been influenced the most.

It would take several volumes to discuss the many factors that have directly or indirectly affected children or the way that we regard them. Instead, let us examine a few things that shape our children's lives, the opportunities and pressures on them and the spiritual journeys that they are undertaking. This will help us to understand them as people in their own right and to highlight the challenges and opportunities that they present to us, the Church.

### LAW AND ORDER

Legislation concerning the care and education of children has transformed the ways that children are cared for and the ways that they are expected to learn. The Children Act (1989), the biggest piece of legislation concerning children for over a century, has made the welfare of the child paramount whether in the home, school or the wider community. Health and safety and child protection legislation and guidelines have had enormous effects on voluntary agencies, including the Church. They have forced church councils to take responsibility for their children, and many have risen to the

challenge by providing higher standards of care and more training for children's leaders.

The government's policy of *Wrap Around Childcare* (1998) has presented the Church with opportunities for outreach to children in the community through pre-schools, holiday clubs, after-school and even breakfast clubs. The *Sure Start* (2003) plan of a centre in every area geared towards children of less than five years presents yet more prospects for ways in which the local church can be of service.

The Disability Discrimination Act (1995) gives everyone equal access to all services, including voluntary organizations. This has enormous training implications for voluntary bodies that work with children. Churches should always have welcomed children with special needs or disabilities as fellow members of the body of Christ. Now they are legally obliged to do so and to make equal provision for them.

### Legislation and schools

Since the National Curriculum was established in 1989, followed by Ofsted inspections, there have been enormous changes in the ways that children are taught and expected to learn. The emphasis at the time of writing is on testing rather than assessment. Many teachers and children have responded well to the challenges, but creative subjects like music and drama are being squeezed out and lack of time and space to play may be a factor in some of the increased behavioural difficulties in quite young children. These are challenges to which the Church could respond through its work among children.

Changes in RE have presented opportunities for children to visit local churches as part of their studies and take part in acts of worship, including the Eucharist. Spiritual development is now officially recognized as an intrinsic part of a child's formation and forms part of Ofsted inspections.

## VARIED LIFESTYLES

Family life has altered beyond recognition during the last 20 years. The increase in flexible working patterns has allowed mothers with young children to continue working and put pressure on lone parents to support themselves. Development of 24-hour call centres, Sunday trading, and the explosion of fast food outlets are obvious examples of the changed pattern of work and lifestyle. The services provided are widely welcomed in that they have created jobs and supported busy families but they have reduced the time that some of the poorest parents and children can spend together. The basic structure of daily life has been severely damaged. Shared meals, regular working hours, and Sunday as a day of rest and recreation are things of the past. A large number of children spend some weekends and holiday time with their second parent and often a second family.

Given those trends, it is unrealistic for the church to confine its ministry among children to Sunday morning. It is more sensible to respond to the present social situation by providing holiday, midweek and even breakfast clubs.

## POVERTY

The gap between the richest and poorest families has grown. This is not confined to certain regions; neither can affluence be hidden from any part of society. Children have alluring clothes, toys, interests and relationships pumped into their homes through television and computers and see them enjoyed by some of their peers. If, however, they are victims of long-term unemployment, poor housing and the poverty associated with such deprivation, they soon become acutely aware that they lack many of the good things that are enjoyed by other children, maybe even those in the same class at school. These youngsters and their parents need the support of the local church in giving them a place of welcome where they are valued as individuals and given a sense of self-worth.

## ICT AND ALL THAT

These changes have had major effects on children's lives. As if that were not enough, there are the rapid developments in technology and children's access to it. In 1990, computers were simple and largely confined to the workplace. The Internet was virtually unknown. Today, nearly half of homes have a PC and every child has access to a computer to study information and communication technology (ICT) at school. Information for homework can be accessed through the Internet quickly and easily. Children play computer games and go to computer clubs. Media reports claim that 75 per cent of children have mobile phones and are more adept than adults at text messaging. The four channels on television have grown literally tenfold, with added entertainment through videos and DVDs.

If this is the average child's way of communicating, we need to provide our children with attractive versions of the Bible, stories that relate to their lives and make the most of the opportunities provided by the Internet.

## MULTI-TASK LIVES

The days of 9-to-5 work, a job for life, and a set structure for education are long gone. Flexible working patterns are the norm. Although the curriculum and testing in school are more structured than 20 years ago, there is greater understanding about how children and young people learn. They tend to work in groups or individually. Public exams are a combination of course work and testing. Subjects like music, art and drama stress individual creativity. A wealth of courses is available to people of all ages and lifestyles.

Children talk to friends or text them on mobile phones while walking down the street, having another conversation, or in a club or shop. They can contact people all over the world through the Internet, and play games as well as having conversations while eating a meal or doing another task.

A church service or children's nurture programme with a leader at the front and everyone sitting still and responding together can be quite alien to a child's experience. Indeed, it is more akin to a 'spectator sport' than daily life in school or at home. This does not deny the benefits of corporate worship by a gathered community of all ages, but suggests that flexible prayer activities could be used as well with groups of young people. This is discussed in detail in the Centre Point, 'Worship: making God real'.

## SPIRITUALITY AND FAITH DEVELOPMENT

The world at large has a deep interest in spirituality, but this is rarely linked to Christianity. Church is seen to be irrelevant to today's world and even contrary to the principles that it claims to uphold. Most young parents are unfamiliar with church, worship, basic Christian prayers and hymns, yet they claim to have a certain belief and many pray regularly.

Children have a natural spirituality and sense of awe and wonder. This being so, every child whose life you touch will have had some spiritual experience and will have started on a spiritual journey that will last his or her whole life. Our ministry with children and the parents that we meet is to travel alongside them and act as guides and friends. This involves respecting their past experiences, their joys and sorrows as well as proclaiming the good news in a way that is appropriate for them.

Young children have a powerful sense of the nearness but otherness of God. They are susceptible to atmosphere, and experience a sense of his presence in worship and prayer. Some of them will show profound understanding about the nature of God and the way that he works in their lives. God can and does work through children, and the Church that takes this seriously will always be humbled but given a sense of vitality by their perceptions and their ministry.

## Gaining confidence

As children develop, they begin to question much of what they have experienced and ask searching questions about faith and life. Most of them would be unwilling to admit to any relationship with God (by any name) or prayer life to their peers. It is not 'cool' to be a Christian and it is very lonely in the playground for the youngster who is open about his or her faith. These youngsters need support from their families, teachers and local church groups if they are to have confidence in their beliefs and the security to explore them.

Although we may go to great lengths to welcome young people as part of the church family, we need to be conscious that they are generally reluctant to belong to any institution, and that this spreads far beyond religious allegiance. For example, many young people do not vote in elections or join societies or clubs. They do, however, have a deep interest in spirituality which is commonly manifested in the idea of God being present within them and a sense of some sort of life after death. This whole subject is explored in Chapter 3, 'Engagement and faith sharing'.

The recent interest in and development of Islam in the West may well lead to a more positive attitude to proclaiming our own Christian faith. In areas and schools with both Christian and Muslim children, the theological perspective is heightened, leading to questions and discussion. This should encourage Christian children to have a more confident and robust attitude to the way that they practise their faith, while respecting their friends of other faiths and cultures.



### TIME FOR REFLECTION

Call to mind the children you know and their families. Perhaps they are your own children or close relations. Maybe you work with children or some live near you.

- How do your relations and friends with children organize their meals and free time?
- How many of them work at the weekends or on shifts?
- Do the children have computers at home? Do they use mobile phones?
- What are the things that interest the children you know?
- What can today's children do and enjoy that you could not?

Compare this with the lifestyle of your family and friends when you were a child. This is not about whether one lifestyle was 'better' but appreciating how they are different.

### BIBLE LINK

#### 1 SAMUEL 3:1-10

This story about Samuel is of a child hearing and responding to God's call. At first, he thinks it is the voice of his teacher, Eli. It takes time and Eli's guidance before Samuel recognizes God's voice.

Samuel served the Lord by helping Eli the priest, who was by that time almost blind. In those days, the Lord hardly ever spoke directly to people, and he did not appear to them in dreams very often. But one night, Eli was asleep in his room, and Samuel was sleeping on a mat near the sacred chest in the Lord's house. They had not been asleep very long when the Lord called out Samuel's name.

'Here I am!' Samuel answered. Then he ran to Eli and said, 'What do you want?'

'I didn't call you,' Eli answered. 'Go back to bed.'

Samuel went back.

Again the Lord called out Samuel's name. Samuel got up and went to Eli. 'Here I am,' he said. 'What do you want?'

Eli told him, 'Son, I didn't call you. Go back to sleep.'

The Lord had not spoken to Samuel before, and Samuel did not

recognize the voice. When the Lord called out his name for the third time, Samuel went to Eli again and said, ‘Here I am. What do you want?’

Eli finally realized that it was the Lord who was speaking to Samuel. So he said, ‘Go back and lie down! If someone speaks to you again, answer, “I am listening, Lord. What do you want me to do?”’

Once again, Samuel went back and lay down.

The Lord then stood beside Samuel and called out as he had before, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’

‘I am listening,’ Samuel answered. ‘What do you want me to do?’

### Think or discuss

Faith arises from hearing God speaking our name, discerning it, and then responding to it. For most of us, it will not be a literal call and, as with Samuel, it may be difficult to discern whether it is really the voice of God. We can confuse God’s voice with our own wishes or pressures and expectations from other people. Children have enormous pressures from their culture, peer pressure and educational attainment that can cause confusion when they have to make decisions, including recognizing the voice of God.

- Do we believe that God can and does speak to and through children?
- What is the local church’s role in being mentors to children as Eli was to Samuel?
- How can we be mentors to children in our Christian community as Eli was to Samuel, so that they develop spiritually and grow in faith?
- How can we help children in our wider community to have an opportunity to recognize and be equipped to respond to God’s voice when he speaks their name?
- God’s message to Samuel was not a pleasant one, especially for Eli: read verses 11–18. Are we prepared to accept that if we seek to

engage with children on their journey of faith, this will involve change in our church community that some people may find difficult?

### CASE STUDY: THE KOS CLUB

The following story is about a church where the children's ministry was tiny. Then the vicar realized that Sunday might not be the best day for the children, and that formal teaching might not be appealing to today's youngsters.

Very few children used to attend St Edward's church, Cheddleton. Numbers fluctuated and, even on a good Sunday, only about six youngsters would turn up for Junior Church.

That was until the vicar, Martin, had the idea of starting Cheddleton's KOS (Kids on Saturdays) club to replace the Junior Church.

Once a month, on Saturday morning, about 35 children meet to play games, have Christian teaching and, of course, enjoy having refreshments and meeting their friends. The club has been running for a year and the children attend regularly. They are led by Pat, one of the clergy and a former infants' teacher, with a team of eight adults, while other members of the congregation help with refreshments. Everyone is very enthusiastic about the project and confidence is growing rapidly.

The children are encouraged to attend and take part in the Family Service the following day. They come from both Methodist and Anglican backgrounds but the majority of the children had no links with a church before they started attending KOS. The Anglican church gears its service towards children of less than ten years, while the older children go on to Crusaders at the Methodist church after that.

### Think or discuss

- How was the adult congregation affected by these changes?
- What extra work and cost were caused by these changes?
- How did the children who attended the Anglican and Methodist churches benefit?
- What was the evangelistic perspective of the change in the children's ministry?
- What difference did the KOS club make to the wider community?
- How did the whole worshipping community benefit?

### Cost and courage

The financial cost of establishing the KOS club was probably very small but it took courage and ingenuity. It engaged with children and their lifestyles, and the results had a ripple effect on the worship of two churches as well as enabling more youngsters to hear and respond to the Christian story.

Reviewing the way that the Church has engaged with children in the community in the past as well as the present, and discussing the ways that we can meet and share our faith with them, are essential parts of our evangelistic task. They are the subjects of the next two chapters.

It is a well-known fact that most youngsters who come to church are the children of the adult congregation and, depressingly, nearly half of our churches claim that they have no children at all. If we look beyond Sunday morning, however, we see a more optimistic picture.

There are children worshipping regularly at family services, and attending parent and toddler clubs, midweek activities and church schools. There are children who come to Mothering Sunday, Harvest Thanksgiving, Parade or Christingle services. There are children at school carol services, or guests at baptisms or weddings, and occasionally at funerals. And there are the hidden children who use the church hall for sports or drama, who belong to uniformed organizations or visit a church as part of an RE lesson.

This book is about enabling those children to hear the Christian story. It aims to provide thought-provoking guidance to explore the wealth of opportunities for evangelism among children, and a training base for clergy and children's workers.

Drawing on many years' experience, Margaret Withers:

- reviews the ways we can engage with young people and the obstacles that we unwittingly put in the way
- examines strategic planning and ways of managing change
- explores the rationale for evangelism among children
- provides advice on running specific clubs or activities

*Foreword by Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury*

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